

# Voices of the Valley Concert Tour of Wales 2017



The Voices of the Valley are shown here singing "Ain't No Grave" by Paul Caldwell and Sean Ivory at the Noel Davies MBE Cyngerdd Goffa on July 1 at Pontarddulais.

## **Triumphant Tour of South Wales by American Youth Choir**

By Dr. Silas R. Powell

Five brilliantly-conceived and flawlessly executed concerts by Voices of the Valley, under the direction of Gina Pascolini and with Marty Ort as accompanist, were performed during the choir's 5-concert tour of South Wales, June 18-July 3, 2017. Full houses and enthusiastic standing ovations were the order of the day at all of those concerts.

In the repertory of Voices of the Valley were six songs that the American students sang in Welsh, to the delight and enthusiastic approval of the audiences at all of the concerts: *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*, *Suo Gan*, *Calon Lan*, *Cwm Rhondda*, *Rachie*, and *Amazing Grace*.

The first of these five concerts took place on June 23 in Saint Cynog's Church, Ystradgynlais. Performances by the Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe and by students from Ysgol Gyfun Ystalyfera were an integral part of this concert.

Four concerts were then performed by the Voices of the Valley at Welsh comprehensive schools: on June 26 at Ysgol Bro Dinefwr, Llandeilo (performances by Ysgol Bro Dinefwr students, under the direction of Conway Morgan, were featured on the program); on June 28 at Ysgol Bae Baglan, Port Talbot (performances by students at Ysgol Bae Baglan and by the Cymric Male Voice Choir were an integral part of this musical evening); on June 30 at Morriston Comprehensive School, Morriston (performances by the Morriston RFC Male Choir, Morriston Comprehensive Singers, and Cwmrhydyceirw Primary School Choir were featured during the evening).

The last of the five concerts performed by these students from America on their international odyssey of music and song was performed on July 1 as part of the Noel Davies MBE Cyngerdd Goffa, Pontarddulais Comprehensive Community School. Soul stirring and inspired performances by the Cor Meibion Pontarddulais Male Choir and by the Voices of the Valley Choir made this evening of music and fellowship unforgettable.

In addition to those five concerts, the American choir was honored to be asked to participate in the program of dedication at the refurbished Daniel Protheroe Memorial Park at Ystradgynlais on July 1, 2017. At the opening of the ceremonies, the Voices of the Valley sang *The Star-Spangled Banner*. That performance of the American national anthem was followed by a performance, in Welsh, by the Voices of the Valley, of two verses of Daniel Protheroe's hymn *Cwmgiedd*, a performance which many people have described as "a brilliant rendering" of that hymn.

Daniel Protheroe, who was born at Cwmgiedd near Ystradgynlais, Brecknockshire in 1866, emigrated to America as a young man and gained great fame as a conductor, educator, and composer, renowned for over 1,500 compositions. He died in 1934, and his earthly remains were interred in Forest Hills Cemetery, Dunmore, Pennsylvania, which is only a few miles from Archbald, Pennsylvania, where is located the home school of the Voices of the Valley choir.



The Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe, under the direction of Conway Morgan, were featured in the musical evening on June 23 at Saint Cynog's Church at Ystradgynlais, as were students from Ysgol Ystalfera. This was also the first concert performance in Wales by the Voices of the Valley, under the direction of Gina Pascolini, with Marty Ort as accompanist.

During their two-week tour, the Voices of the Valley choir also sang selections from their repertory at many non-concert hall locations. In England: at Stonehenge and at Saint Paul's Cathedral; in Wales: at Tintern Abbey, Oxwich Bay Hotel, Danyr Ogof Caves, Craig-y-Nos Castle, National Botanical Gardens, St. David's Cathedral, the Welsh Senedd at Cardiff, Ystradgynlais Conservative Club, Blanco Hotel in Port Talbot, and Raglan Castle.

Given the fact that those sites were, in all cases, perfect venues for the musical selections chosen by Ms. Pascolini and performed at those sites by the choir, the performances were unforgettable, not only for the choir and friends traveling with the choir on their concert tour, but also for visitors to those sites whose good fortune it was to present as the choir sang.

At Tintern Abbey, at Saint Paul's Cathedral, and at St. David's Cathedral, for example, the choir's performance of "Amazing Grace" was enriched by the



centuries-old ecclesiastical context in which that hymn was performed at those sites.

The same is true of the performance by Voices of the Valley of John Rutter's "All Things Bright and Beautiful" at the National Botanical Gardens of Wales. There, in the Great Glasshouse, before a backdrop of the breathtaking natural beauty of Wales, and accompanied by the benign and innocent songs of birds, the tragedy at Aberfan, on October 21, 1966, when 116 children and 28 adults were killed in the catastrophic collapse of a colliery spoil tip there, was rendered heart breaking and unforgettably poignant by the flawless performance by the choir of Rutter's wonderful song.

Selwyn Morris, a member of the Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe from Ystradgynlais, who served as the Welsh language coach for the American students, noted: "These students are absolutely amazing. They sing in Welsh as if it were their native language."



Gina Pascolini is the Choral Director of the Voices of the Valley Choir. She is shown here with Selwyn Morris, Ystradgynlais, a member of the Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe and the Welsh language coach for the students in the Voices of the Valley Choir.

The tour director for this concert tour by Voices of the Valley was Ted Frutchev who, over the years, has organized many concert tours to America by choirs from Wales. The highly successful visit to America in October 2015 by the Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe, for example, was organized by Ted Frutchev, and during that choir's American tour the choir at Valley View High School performed on the same program with them at a concert in Carbondale. Following that concert, at the request of the Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe and Her Majesty's Representative to the County of Powys, the Voices of the Valley on this concert tour of Wales were invited to perform in Wales. In speaking of the members of the Voices of the Valley choir, Ted Frutchev noted: "This is America at its best."

During their time in Wales, the students visited many important historic sites in Wales, including Tintern Abbey, Craig Y Nos Castle, Laugharne Castle, the Dylan Thomas Boathouse at Tenby, Catell Cydweli, St. David's Cathedral, St. Fagan's National Museum of History, Big Pit National Coal Museum, Raglan Castle, Carreg Cennen Castle & Farm, Cardiff Castle and City of Cardiff, and Castell Caerdydd.



Ted Frutchev was the tour director for the Voices of the Valley 5-concert tour of Wales, June 18-July 3, 2017. Over the years, he has organized many concert tours to America by choirs from Wales.

Seeing first-hand the natural beauty of South Wales also an important part of the trip for the students, who visited Rhossili Bay and village and the Gower peninsula, Pen Pyrod, Mumbles Pier, Saint Govan's Head at Boshereton, Oxwich Bay, Danyr Ogof Caves, and Llandeilo.

The choir and friends spent an enchanting day in Ystradgynlais on July 1. The day began with a 40-minute concert by the choir on the terrace at the Conservative Club, followed by an afternoon at the Buskagynlais in town and a bountiful Thanksgiving-style dinner at the Ynisedwyn Arms, to be followed by the re-dedication of the Daniel Protheroe Monument there.



The Cor Meibion Pontarddulais Male Choir, with Clive Phillips, Musical Director, are shown here at the opening of the Noel Davies MBE Cyngerdd Goffa, on July 1, at Pontarddulais. The Voices of the Valley Choir from Pennsylvania were thrilled to be invited to perform at this important memorial concert.

Parents and friends of the Voices of the Valley took advantage of the opportunity, during their time in Wales, to make in-depth visits to historic sites not on the choir's itinerary. Those visits included a guided tour by John Owens, given to Jerry Williams and S. Robert Powell, of the primary Ystradgynlais historic sites, including the Ynisedwyn Ironworks, the Gorsedd Stones park that commemorates the 1954 National Eisteddfod at Ystradgynlais, the Miners' Memorial/Diamond Park (the site of the former Diamond Colliery), and a visit to Cwmgiedd and the pear tree and historical plaque there in memory of the inhabitants of the Czech mining community of Lidice, all of whom were killed, and the town erased from the map, in 1943, by the Nazis. That vicious act of hatred is the subject of the World War II film "The Silent Village," which was filmed at Cwmgiedd.



In addition, Selwyn Morris of Ystradgynlais hosted and conducted a day-long historical and genealogical tour for S. Robert Powell, to the Head of The Valleys and to the Blenavon National Historic Site there. Jerry Williams, the publicity chairman and media director for the Voices of the Valley tour, and Dr. Powell, both representing the Carbondale Historical Society in Pennsylvania, are presently focused on establishing a active working relationship with the Ystradgynlais District Heritage and Language Society, and other historical and genealogical societies in Wales. The stimulus for their research interest in this Carbondale/Wales initiative is the fact that ninety Welsh families were recruited in Wales, in 1830-1832, and brought to the Lackawanna Valley in Pennsylvania in order to teach the miners in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania how to conduct deep underground shaft mining.

The members of the Voices of the Valley 2017 Welsh Tour were: Beatrice Chindemi, Sarah Ferraro, Mia Tomassoni, Kaedy Masters, Cas Dumas, Joe Morisco, Justin Thomas, Kevin Mellow, Kara Hirjak, Cammie Gillar, Emily Williams, Julia Romanovich, Ryleah Ruffner, Noah Reed, Chris Benitez, Paulie Vanvestraut, Brianna Pallo, Juilie Krupka, Carleigh Gillar, Deanna Soulsby, Lorna Yushinsky, Noah McKane, Noah Benjamin, Teresa Dumas, Giavanna Mercatilli, Smantha Humen, Janet Zhao, Eric Lee, Josh Rudolph, and Kasidy Leggin.



The Central Memorial in the refurbished Daniel Protheroe Memorial Park, Ystradgynlais, was unveiled on July 1 by Mrs. Hannah Protheroe Griffiths, great niece of Daniel Protheroe. During those ceremonies, Ted Frutchey, on behalf of the Voices of the Valley, presented Mrs. Griffiths with a framed photograph of the tombstone of Daniel Protheroe in Forest Hills Cemetery, Dunmore, Pennsylvania.

This concert tour of South Wales by the Voices of the Valley choir was an intellectual, choral, and cultural achievement of the highest order, and the members of the choir and friends will never forget it. As the tour came to an end, Gina Pascolini noted: “The power of music knows no boundaries—not in miles, age or language. We are most humbled, blessed and thankful to have been able to make this trip to Wales and to have made friends for a lifetime.”

Many members of the tour will surely one day return to Wales. In a heart-warming and unforgettable expression of friendship, members of the Ystradgynlais Conservative Club, at the “afterglow” reception there following the choir’s final concert in Wales, sang, as a farewell gift to the American choir, “We’ll Keep a Welcome”. That moment and fond memories of this concert tour will be treasured forever by the Voices of the Valley Choir and friends.

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